

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Essay Contest – 2002

First Prize: Michelle Kim

What am I to think when I hear the words "Stride Toward Freedom"? I don't think I've ever stopped whatever it was I was doing to think about the freedom I have. The freedom my grandfather yearned for, literally running for life across the Korean border with no shoes, commies shooting at his heels. The freedom the citizens of North Korea would trade anything for. The freedom I haven't thought twice about in the passing of a day.

For the longest time, I never thought myself as a whole different race. I grew up in a suburb of Lincoln, Nebraska, and well, there weren't too many Asians there. I was the only Korean at my school, only one other Asian, Gregory, who was Vietnamese. All but a few of my friends were Caucasian, but that didn't matter. I was a kid among kids. There was no reason to think myself as a different race. I might've been a bit more eccentric than most, but other than that, I grew up as an all-American child. I guess I'm what some would call a Twinkie (a banana if you prefer) - yellow on the outside and white on the inside. Of course, I was teased sometimes, but never truly offended or harassed. With the lack of Asianity in Nebraska, it was pretty easy to be ignorant and naïve. In fact, back in my days there, most of the kids I knew didn't know where Korea was, or for that matter, what Korea was. Even to this day, I'm assumed Chinese at first glance. For the longest time, boys would mockingly say "konichiwa" or "nihou", clapping their hands together, elbows at a 90° angle, and bowing deeply to me, trying to be funny, but failing miserably (if you don't count the chuckles and sniggers of his chums). A group of girls came up to me one day and asked, "If Chinese eyes are like this *slanted upward* and Japanese eyes are like this *slanted downward* are Korean eyes like this? *pulled eyes straight back*" Countless times I was asked to say something in Chinese or tell them about my homeland, China, forgetting the fact that I've never been there and that I was born in Minnesota. Being young and not having the handy ability my brother has of having good comebacks, I would faintly laugh with them and forget about it. Once, I talked back and said, "I'm not Chinese, I'm Korean." Then the older boy whom I was directing my comment to replied with, "No, you're not, you're Chinese," with a sneer, probably trying to hide the fact that he'd never heard of Korea. Not knowing how to answer to that apparent fact, I simply walked away laughing to myself, shaking my head in disbelief.

Martin Luther King, Jr. was a great man, no doubt, but I cannot relate to him and his work for African Americans directly. As I said at the very beginning, I've never seriously considered the freedom I possess. My family struggled so much for freedom in the past and I, like a spoiled child, thought nothing of the luxury I and all of America have. It was extremely tough for all the citizens of Korea when their country was divided. So many people were killed trying to escape and to this day, families separated by an invisible line known as a border have practically no way of contacting each other. I can understand why blacks could have had hateful feelings toward whites (why whites hated blacks so much, I may never really understand) because many South Koreans hate

communists, including my own father. His two great uncles were shot while trying to escape and his older brother, about five years old at the time, died from a disease caught from walking miles on end with his family in a mercilessly cold January after the commies kicked them out and took over that area. You do not want to talk about communists with my dad because he, frankly, hates them. In a short, yet impacting discussion with him, he referred to commies as the "...human form of evil...pure evil." It's easy to want to hurt after being hurt so much. I'm reading *Black Like Me* by John Howard Griffin and it's absolutely mind-boggling how cruel whites were. I have the highest respect for Martin Luther King, Jr., who, even after the most malicious actions against blacks, encouraged African-Americans to be peaceful and not vindictive.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was a man blind to color and a rare individual who read the book before looking at the cover. He made his first mark in the civil rights movement by leading the black community of Montgomery, Alabama on a 382-day boycott against the city's bus lines, in light of Rosa Parks arrest. Working through the Montgomery Improvement Association, King overcame an arrest (for driving 30 mph in a 25 mph zone), being subjected to personal abuse, and even a bombing of his home. His perseverance did not go in vain, for on December 21, 1956, the U.S. Supreme Court declared the Alabama laws requiring bus segregation unconstitutional. The boycott ended in a glorious success--not only were blacks now able to ride buses with whites as equals, but Martin Luther King, Jr. emerged as a national hero and a civil rights figure of growing importance.

In the eleven-year period between 1957 and 1968, King traveled over 6 million miles and spoke over 2,500 times, appearing wherever there was injustice. As he created history, he wrote some down too, writing five books as well as a cornucopia of articles. In these years, he led a colossal protest in Birmingham, Alabama, that caught the attention of the entire world and also inspiring his "Letter from a Birmingham Jail", but that wasn't all. These eleven years are something Dr. King can be proud of because he worked like the devil would catch him if he stopped! He planned the drives in Alabama for the registration of Negroes as voters; he directed the peaceful march on Washington, D.C., of 250,000 people to whom he delivered his famous speech, "I Have a Dream"; he conferred with President John F. Kennedy and campaigned for President Lyndon B. Johnson; he was awarded five honorary degrees; was named Man of the Year by Time magazine in 1963; was the youngest man to be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize at the age of 35; and became not only the symbolic leader of American blacks, but also a world hero.

Stride toward freedom. Almost a demand, if you think about it. Well, since it's insisted, I'll stride toward the freedom to be an individual in a vicious junior high world. I'll stride toward the freedom to do what I want and wear what I want and not be inflicted upon. I'll stride toward the freedom to be a kid and carefree before the cruel tick-tock of time unveils grey hairs and wrinkles on an aged face. "Let freedom ring from the mighty mountains of New York. Let freedom ring from the heightening Alleghenies of Pennsylvania! Let freedom ring from the snowcapped Rockies of Colorado! Let freedom ring from the curvaceous peaks of California! But not only that; let freedom ring from

Stone Mountain of Georgia! Let freedom ring from Lookout Mountain of Tennessee! Let freedom ring from every hill and every molehill of Mississippi. From every mountainside, let freedom ring." - Martin Luther King, Jr. "I Have a Dream"

Bibliography

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